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Congress considering commemoration, funding for historic site

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Little Rock Central High School, an early battleground in the civil rights movement, stands to garner more national recognition with the minting of a commemorative coin and more federal funding for the completion of its visitor's center.

"Today is a very good day for Little Rock Central High School," U.S. Sen. Mark Pryor, D-Ark., said in a joint teleconference Thursday with U.S. Sen. Blanche Lincoln, D-Ark., and seven members of the Little Rock Nine.

Pryor said the Senate Banking Committee approved the minting of a coin commemorating the integration of the school, and a Senate Appropriations committee approved \$5.1 million in funding for the Little Rock Central Museum and Visitor's Center.

The coin, which has yet to be designed, would be one of two commemorative coins minted in 2007, the 50th anniversary of when the Little Rock Nine integrated the school.

"Now we have to get (the bill) through on the Senate floor," Pryor said, "but we don't expect any opposition."

The other coin to be minted commemorates the 400th anniversary of the founding of Jamestown colony in Virginia, the first English settlement in the New World, he said.

Pryor said that 500,000 legal-tender one-dollar coins will be issued. There is a \$10 surcharge when purchasing the coin, and any money left after the coverage costs would go to the Museum and Visitor's Center.

Pryor said that, because of the surcharge, the museum could net as much as \$5 million from the coin.

U.S. Rep. Vic Snyder, D-Ark., initiated the effort for the coin and had 321 co-sponsors for his bill in the House. Pryor and Lincoln have 71 cosponsors in the Senate, he said.

Arkansas' three other House members - Reps. Mike Ross and Marion Berry, both Democrats, and John Boozman, a Republican, were among the bill's original co-sponsors.

The second victory for Little Rock Central, Pryor said, was the approval of the \$5.1 million for the completion of the Visitor's Center in time for the 50th anniversary of the school's desegregation.

Lincoln said that having the center completed for the anniversary was an important goal.

Pryor added that, with the federal money, the Visitor's Center will become a major attraction for Little Rock.

Minnijean Brown Trickey, one of the original nine students to integrate Central High, said she thinks the visitor's center will be an opportunity for healing.

"We've had 50 years to heal, but it will be a concrete place of healing," she said.

Both Lincoln and Pryor noted the importance of the desegregation of Central High in the Civil Rights Movement and the efforts to commemorate the courage of the nine who integrated.

"The events that took place in 1957 really shaped our nation, and we have future generations out there that need to understand what happened," Lincoln said.